NATIONAL & WORLD NEWS STORY



# Japanese America: Fading and Assimilating

**By Justin Pritchard/AP**

The sleepy two-block strip of Japanese restaurants, markets and other shops snaps to activity for two regular occasions — the Silicon Valley business lunch crunch and the funeral gatherings that seem to come more often these days.

Like many of its cousins across the United States, Japantown in San Jose is shrinking. In fact, the Japanese American population is itself in decline. During the 1990s, even as other Asian American groups grew remarkably, the number of Americans of Japanese ancestry fell by more than 6 percent to just under 800,000 people.

Several factors conspired to drive the decrease: low birth rates and a trickle of recent immigrants mean the population lacks a fresh stock of newcomers. Japanese Americans also frequently marry other races, further eroding a common identity.

All this, and an aging population.

“There are funerals all the time,” says Harry Fukuhara, 81, standing before a Buddhist temple just off Jackson Street, Japantown’s main commercial strip. “People come from all over to attend.”

In San Jose, the hangouts used to be pool halls and dormitories. Now they’re a senior center and a Veterans of Foreign Wars post.

It’s a story of decline retold in other once-bustling Japanese

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American enclaves. Korean businesses seem to dominate San Francisco's Japantown. An old-timer returning to Los Angeles might hardly recognize Little Tokyo.

Implications of the decrease go beyond the commercial sector. Institutions such as the national Japanese American Citizens League steadily lose members, and cornerstones of communal vigor such as local newspapers and youth basketball leagues have been crumbling.

Use of the Japanese language is slipping. Along Jackson Street, most signs are written in English.

"In my own family, my children, my grandchildren have no knowledge of Japanese," says Fukuhara, himself a World War II military intelligence translator for the U.S. against Japan. "When you don't speak the language, a lot of the culture and other things that go with it aren't retained."

One reason there are fewer people to retain the culture is a low birth rate, a trend that puts Japanese Americans in step with Japan itself.

Take John Tateishi, executive director of the Japanese American Citizens League, the nation's oldest Asian civil rights group. He was one of four kids, his wife one of six. They have two children.

"We're not any different than the rest of America," says Tateishi.

The Japanese American population is concentrated in Hawaii and California, which lost 24,000 residents of Japanese ancestry, an 8 percent drop. Meanwhile during the 90s, the number of Americans of Indian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean and Filipino descent all grew dramatically, boosting California's overall Asian American population by more than 60 percent.

Immigrants drive these increases. Recent arrivals helped Koreatown in Los Angeles retain its commercial and social vitality, even though many residents are Latino.

But the Japanese American community has enjoyed no such influx. Less than 5,500 Japanese entered the United States during 1998, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. No longer confined to ethnic ghettoes by state and federal law, Japanese Americans have settled deeper into the American suburban mainstream.

"Japanese Americans, more than a lot of other Asian Americans, acculturated into American society," says Tim Kudo, 20, a Los Angeles resident of Japanese and white ancestry. "That

connection with white society allowed more interracial marriages."

As a result, the meaning of "Japanese American" constantly changes. So does the range of faces of Americans with Japanese ancestry.

The declining population has not hurt the community's political health too much.

Japanese Americans experienced a political awakening beginning in the mid 1970s. Five people won elections to federal offices and another became governor of Hawaii during that decade.

The push into party politics led Congress to pass the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which promised $20,000 to each of the approximately 120,000 residents of Japanese ancestry whom the government locked into internment camps during World War II.

Four Japanese Americans now hold federally elected office, and former congressman Norman Y. Mineta is Secretary of Transportation. All are Democrats.

Because they retained political power, Japanese Americans are helping usher other Asian Americans into office, says first-term Rep. Mike Honda, D-Calif. He points to Chinese Americans such as Rep. David Wu of Oregon and Governor Gary Locke of Washington.

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